

## Social and Economic Stress: Women's Health in Fishing Communities

The collapse of the Atlantic Canada ground fishery and other changes have seriously affected the sustainability of many coastal communities in Atlantic Canada. Women are particularly vulnerable in this situation because of their widely varied roles in the family and community. In Newfoundland and Labrador, 12,000 of the 35,000 fishers and plant workers who lost their jobs as a result of the moratoria on the Atlantic cod fishery were women. The crisis has exacerbated women's fears about outmigration and community decline as social support structures for those women who remain erode, thereby reducing their capacity to manage stress.

The aim of this research project was to find out how women's health and well-being are being affected by the downturn in the fishery and by the associated economic and social changes facing coastal communities. The research was motivated by the fact that the specific impact of the fishery crisis on women has been invisible or ignored. Women have always worked hard in fishing families doing most of the child care and home management while helping to run the fishing business. They have often been at the core of activities which help keep communities together. How has the current situation affected them?

**\* Nova Scotia Women's FishNet partnered with the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women to conduct the Social and Economic Stress and Women's Health in Fishing Communities research project. Linda Christiansen-Ruffman, and Stella Lord, CRIAW-Nova Scotia, served as project research coordinators. Local FishNet groups provided the participant researchers.**

### Methodology

- ❖ The research design included a participatory approach employing different data gathering methods; evaluation of the methodology is a specific component of this project
- ❖ Ten community-based researchers (two each from five Nova Scotia communities) invited women informally to reflect on their communities (a variant of participant observation), conducted focus groups and held semi-structured individual interviews with twenty women; two communities also introduced an action research component into their research design
- ❖ The researchers came together in a workshop to share their insights, to analyze the information they had collected, and to brainstorm and develop a plan for follow-up action
- ❖ Local FishNet groups conducted workshops to discuss the issues women identified and local needs, e.g., identifying the need for more supportive communication to overcome a sense of isolation and restore empowerment led to a plan in one small community to develop a resource centre using existing resources and peer support techniques
- ❖ Using different but complementary data collection methods uncovered the complexity of women's lives in coastal communities and the importance of using multiple methods of data collection in these situations

## Findings

- ❖ The impact of the changes in fishing communities, especially for women, was more devastating than researchers had envisaged
- ❖ Women's health and well-being are being negatively affected; the most common problem identified was high stress level
- ❖ Many women reported feelings of poor health, weariness and frequent small illnesses which in turn affected the general health of their family
- ❖ In some cases, women were experiencing almost a suicidal depression caused by a sense of isolation, helplessness and hopelessness
- ❖ High stress levels were created or exacerbated by the demise or scaling down of family fishing operations, financial instability or uncertainty, social isolation, government policies which hinder rather than help, and unstable or stressful family situations
- ❖ Community conflict and violence and abuse in families have increased over the last five to ten years, especially in those communities most affected by the fisheries crisis
- ❖ Fisheries policies (e.g., restructuring and fishing regulations), government assistance policies offering compensation and retraining (e.g., TAGS), and inadequate social programs (e.g., education, health, social services and employment insurance) exacerbated the situation, often *creating* community conflict and/or social isolation for families and individuals in these communities
- ❖ The women attributed many of their problems to the cumulative results of different government

policies which were dismantling viable communities and the livelihoods of individuals and families; they saw few supportive policies, programs or infrastructure to help them sustain their coastal way of life or deal with community breakdown

- ❖ Many women were resistant to accepting professional help because of a lack of information about services, worries about privacy or safety, or because of a mistaken, but natural, sense of pride
- ❖ These findings demonstrate how the *effects* of policy can be a social determinant of health and how these and other social determinants interact

## Recommendations

- ❖ Develop policies which support the sustainability of small communities
- ❖ Find ways to provide better physical and support infrastructure for coastal communities
- ❖ Make women's concerns and needs central in all policies and programs
- ❖ Treat the issues identified as a matter of urgency, especially accessibility and adequacy of programs and services directed towards women's health and well-being and those dealing with abuse and family violence
- ❖ Undertake more research on the connection between social and economic stress and women's health, as well as on the kind of initiatives and policies that will help coastal communities survive and thrive

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